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# Anthropology Book Forum

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## **Peoples, Place and Performing Arts of the Riau Islands**

### **Reviewer Prof. Dr. Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan**

Margaret Kartomi, editor, 2019, *Performing the Arts of Indonesia. Malay Identity and Politics in the Music, Dance and Theatre of the Riau Islands*. Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, Studies in Asian Topics, no 68. Copenhagen: NIAS Press; xx-340 pp., ISBN: 978-87-7694-259-5

Dispersed from the Straits of Malacca across the South China Sea, from Sumatra, Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore to west Kalimantan, the 2,408 Riau Islands or Kepri (*Kepulauan Riau*) comprise Indonesia's largest province. For a millennia, these islands have formed linkages in trade routes between the Sumatra, Java, south western Borneo, Singapore, Malaya and beyond. The Riau Islands have a long and complex political history going back to at least the Srivijaya Empire (7<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries). After Indonesia attained Independence in 1949, Riau experienced various national governments, each with their own policies of development and the arts. Following the end of Suharto's authoritarian New Order era, which promoted the Javanisation of cultures throughout this vast nation, the Reformasi era saw communities and provinces looking back to their older traditions for inspiration in contemporary times. Riau was granted provincial autonomy in 2004. This book investigates today's cultural situation in Riau, through focussing on the state of the performing arts of the main indigenous inhabitants of the Riau Islands—the Malays and the Orang Suku Laut (“sea peoples”).

Much of the research for this book was conducted from 2012-2016 in Riau with the support of the Indonesian Institute of Science, and funded by a research grant from the Australia Research Council *Discovery Projects* Funding Scheme. Entitled “The Changing Identity and Sustainability of the Music-Cultures and Worldviews of the Riau Islands’ Sea Nomads and Sedentary Malays,” the project was headed by renowned ethnomusicologist Margaret Kartomi of the Sir Zelman Cowan School of Music, Monash University. Earlier research in Riau had also been carried out by members of the team. Two international conferences on the performing arts of the Riau Islands were held in 2012 in Tanjungpinang and then in 2015 at

Monash University in Melbourne. I attended the conference in Melbourne. International scholars and performing artists from Riau were invited to present, along with the project researchers, and the chapters in this book have been developed from those papers presented specifically on Riau. As such, this book is an important academic source on a hitherto largely neglected area of Southeast Asian performing arts.

The book is arranged into four parts, according to locations in Riau. Part I, “The Riau Archipelago in the Southern Malay World” provides an overview of the whole Riau Province, and consists of five chapters. The opening chapter “The islands, the islanders and their performing arts” by Margaret Kartomi provides a detailed introduction to the book, its “across-the-arts” approach, the cultures of the Malays and the Orang Suku Laut and their performing arts genres. It also discusses cosmological and performative concepts of space in Malay and Orang Suku Laut worldviews, and the idea of generative memory codes in performance. This well-written and comprehensive chapter presents important ethnographic and conceptual information for understanding the performing arts of the Riau Islands that are discussed in the rest of the book.

In Chapter 2 “The world of the southern Malays,” Leonard Andaya differentiates the Malays of Riau and west Kalimantan from the Malayic peoples further north due to linguistic and historical differences. He then focusses on the Malays of the formerly so-called Pulau Tujuh Islands (Riau) and west Kalimantan. This chapter provides detailed historical information about the Malays in the Riau area, as well as outside influences in the region including the spread of religions such as Islam. My only question is the statement that “Islam reached Papua New Guinea in the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century” (p.45). Perhaps what is meant is that it touched the western shores of the New Guinea Island with trade from Maluku in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. The eastern nation of Papua New Guinea attained independence in 1975, and Islam was only recently introduced by outsiders. Apart from this minor point, this excellent chapter provides an important historical background for the contextual understanding of the Riau Malays and their diverse and hybrid performing arts.

Cynthia Chou, in Chapter 3 “The sound of music and the Orang Suku Laut today,” discusses the changing soundscape among these semi-nomadic people who once traversed the vast sea expanses between the islands. Comparative references to publications about music of other sea peoples (p. 66) could have also mentioned studies among the west and east coast Sama Bajau of Sabah by Sather, Anis Nor, Hanafi Hussin, Judeth John Baptist, Pugh-Kitingan, and

others. Nevertheless, in the case of the Orang Suku Laut, the writer shows that while some traditional singers still recall their old stories, poetic songs, and other music, their soundscape has changed markedly with the advent of Indonesian Christian songs (*lagu gereja*) and pop songs (*lagu pop*). The writer stresses that it is important to look at these two newer genres together in order to understand change and continuity in Orang Suku Laut identity and culture. The younger generation regard *lagu pop* and *lagu disko* (often played at full blast) as their preferred forms of music, while *lagu Orang Suku Laut* and *pantun* of the older generation are disappearing. In the case of *lagu gereja*, these songs have become a valued part of Orang Suku Laut culture, because their sound expresses local notions of progressiveness. These two genres thus overlap in the contemporary soundscape of the Orang Suku Laut as expressions of perceived modernity.

In Chapter 4, “The *nobat* ensemble in the Riau-Lingga Sultanate, its colonial era demise and its recent sonic re-invention,” Margaret Kartomi looks at the history of the *nobat* ensemble of Riau-Lingga as an important expression of the political and cultural identity of the Sultanate. The chapter traces the intricate history and development of the Sultanate, from Hindu-Buddhist times, through the coming of Islam, into the Dutch colonial era, the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Embedded in this history is the story of its *nobat* instruments over time up to the “silent” years following the formation of the Indonesian nation, and the subsequent sonic rebirth of the ensemble (without some of its instruments) in 2013. This chapter is essential reading for those undertaking research on *nobat* in Southeast Asia, including those ensembles maintained by sultanate palaces in Peninsular Malaysia because it was through Riau that the ensembles were dispersed.

Chapter 5 “Sound, space and social relations in nineteenth century literary texts from the Riau archipelago” by Jenny McCallum explores the now inaudible soundscape of 19<sup>th</sup> century Riau through descriptions given in written records by Malay, Dutch, and British observers. The writer examines historical texts describing both traditional instrumental ensembles (including drumming and cannon-firing) and western band music, as well as genres of vocal music such as *syair*. From these records, she identifies three broad categories of idealised sound and their social importance: *azimat* (“awe-inspiring”) representing Malay regal authority, *ramai* (“busy noisiness”) connoting music for outdoor celebration and festivities, and quieter melodic *merdu* vocal recitations (“harmonious voices”) such as *syair* for religious instruction or secular entertainment. The nature of these soundscapes, gleaned

from descriptions in the literature, defined political spaces and expressed intercommunal social relationships in 19<sup>th</sup> century Riau.

Part II, “Two Western Riau Archipelagos” contains four chapters. Chapter 6 “*Bangsawan* in Lingga: the vanished era of the Lingga-Riau sultanate” by Bronya Kornhauser provides an overview of the development *Bangsawan* theatre in the Lingga archipelago, and the characteristics of the genre. Using field recorded films by Karen Kartomi Thomas, the writer then compares and contrasts two present-day *bangsawan* theatre performances by the Diram Perkase Performing Arts group—one from the indoor proscenium stage of Aisyah Sulaiman Arts Building of Tanjungpinang, and the other in the village of Sungai Buluh, west Singkep. She analyses the vocal and instrumental musical structures of the performances, as linked to the dramatic action. *Bangsawan* in Lingga, as in other parts of southeast Asia, combined Malay and European elements. In Lingga, however, its themes, plots, actions and music recall the historical past of the Lingga-Riau Sultanate. *Bangsawan* for the Lingga Malays is thus distinctive in that it evokes the unique regal past of the Sultanate in the present day.

The *biola* is part of the instrumental ensemble accompanying *Bangsawan*. Hence, Chapter 7 “The significance of place in the musical practice of two *biola* players in Riau Islands Province” by Brigitta Scarfe and Mouhamad Hasbi (a *biola* player from Lingga) focusses on this instrument. They give a short history of the four-stringed European *biola* or viola that was introduced by the Portuguese. They then compare and contrast the performance practice and music of two self-taught *biola* players—Nasri or Pak Itam Pijat from the remote village of Kampung Kukang, Desa Pancur on Lingga Island, and Adi Supriyadi currently living in Tanjungpinang. Nasri’s music retains the traditional performance style with minimal amplification and local community participation, while Adi experiments with *Mak Yong*, “progressive rock,” world music and electronic enhancement. Yet both performers are dealing with issues of cosmopolitanism. One strives to preserve tradition in the face of it, while the other tries to adapt and hybridise tradition to appeal to younger generations.

Chapter 8 “Kinship among Penyengat musicians: the *jiwa seni* of Raja Khadijah, Tengku Fadillah, their forebears and descendants” by Vivienne Wee continues with the focus on musicians that began in Chapter 9, but now examines the hitherto undocumented genealogies and life stories of key self-taught musicians and their families, who happen to be of Viceroy descent. She also discusses the Penyengat Malay concept of *jiwa seni* (“the artistic soul”) as

expressed by these performers and shows how this is continued in the younger generation of musicians.

The importance of the Viceroy's court as an historical source of dance traditions is the theme of Chapter 9 "*Zapin* dancing and *gambus* music in the Viceroy's court at Penyengat" by Raja Alfirafindra and Marina Martiara (translated by Margaret Kartomi). This provides a detailed history of the Kepri style of secular *zapin Melayu* which can be traced back to the Malay palace in Sambas, West Kalimantan. The chapter also deals with Malay concepts of space as expressed through this dance, and looks at current developments in *zapin* performance in Riau.

Part III, "The Northern and Northeastern Archipelagos" consists of two chapters focussing on dance and theatrical genres. Chapter 10 "*Gobang* mask dance theatre: icon of the Anambas Regency" by Syafaruddin, Manolete Mora and Margaret Kartomi describes the night time *gobang* dance by masked dancers on the beach and its accompanying music on Jemaja Island, among the remote Anambas islands of the northern archipelago. This genre originated from shamanistic healing rituals and still retains some occultic elements, but has developed into a form of comedic entertainment at life cycle celebrations and other social events. *Gobang* dancers or *gobang ka* normally wear conical hats and *topeng ka* masks representing various characters, animals and spirits. Although it has its roots in animism, *gobang* has incorporated newer elements from its history. During one *gobang* performance on the night of 21 September 1896, the Dutch Kontrolleur and the local Datuk Kaya joined a *gobang* event to capture a suspected murderer who was dancing with the *gobang ka*, wearing his mask as a disguise. Since then, *gobang* performances have included four *gobang lawa* dressed in black Dutch-style suits, boots, and helmets with green cloth scarves tied across their faces as *topeng lawa* masks. This continuing comic element, indicates local disdain for former colonial and unwanted outside political intrusions that may seek to stifle the cultural life of the community.

Chapter 11 "*Mendu* theatre performance in the Natuna islands (1984-2013): transformations in function, performance practices and style" by Karen Kartomi Thomas discusses continuity and change in *mendu*, a Malay theatre genre based on the Dewa Mendu epic, from the Bunguran District of the Northeastern archipelago. She compares and contrasts a traditional *mendu* performance from 1984 that took place at night on an outdoor stage in the village of Teluk Selahang near Ranai, with a new streamlined version held in a sports hall of Sedanau

Town in 2013. Her detailed analysis of the two very different performances is set against the background of socio-political change, as the genre has regressed from the highly popular traditional village folk genre to the commercialised town version.

Part IV, “The Cities: Art and Popular Culture” contains three chapters. In Chapter 12 “Malay art music composers and performers of Tanjungpinang and Pulau Penyengat” Geoffrey Benjamin explores the performances and repertoires of leading music composers, most of whom are self-taught but have developed their creative skills through electronic media and information from the internet. These include those from Tanjungpinang who produce a variety of hybrid styles by fusing Malay motifs with country, blues, jazz and pop, as well as those from Penyengat whose compositions are more traditional. Many of these musicians, such as Adi Supriyadi and Raja Khadijah are from families of renowned musicians of regal descent, aspects of whose work and heritage were discussed in Chapters 7 and 8.

While Chapter 12 focusses on Malay “art” musicians, Chapter 13 “Musical cosmopolitanism in Kepri: an examination of local aesthetic responses to socio-cultural transformation” by Manolete Mora looks at the work of both underground and popular musicians from Batam City and Tanjungpinang. He compares and contrasts the work of hardcore musicians such as Andy Diablo with the hybrid Malay pop music of others such as Raja Ahmad Helmy and Adi Supriyadi (featured in Chapters 7, 8 and 12). He shows that the cosmopolitan Kepri musical scene largely consists of two divergent music-making trends, one which identifies with major transnational musical styles, the other which adapts global music codes to enrich and develop local Malay music.

Chapter 14 “Who cares about Malay music?” by Nicholas Long concludes the book by examining of the changing sociocultural profile of Riau through the composition and performance of contemporary Riau Malay music by the group Trio Komodo—a group made up, not of Malay musicians, but of members of the immigrant Florinese community. This group of devout Roman Catholics composes and performs out of their love for Malay music. This raises questions of Malay identity and Malayness in the context of performing arts in Riau. Some, such as members of Lembaga Adat Melayu, believe that Malay music should only be created by Muslim ethnic Malays. For others, such as those who hold to the view of the late Riau cultural leader Tenas Effendy, Malay culture should reflect its pre-colonial character of flexible accommodation of wholesome outside elements that enhance its development. Hence, Malay identity is inherently cultural rather than purely ethnic.

In conclusion, *Performing the Arts of Indonesia. Malay Identity and Politics of the Music, Dance and Theatre of the Riau Islands* is a landmark publication that fills a gap in research on the performing arts of Riau. Editor Margaret Kartomi, an expert on Indonesian music, has drawn together a group of esteemed scholars and researchers from various disciplines to produce an academically deep, yet highly relevant publication. Aptly illustrated with maps, colour and black-and-white photographs, diagrams, musical transcriptions and online sources, the publication provides insights into traditional and contemporary culture across the vast reaches of the Kepri Province. The book is a delight to read. It also has important implications for understanding contemporary change and continuity in the performing arts of other Southeast Asian cultures, not only among the Riau Malays and Orang Suku Laut.

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